

# Memoirs from the House of the Dead

## PART I

### Books 1 - 4

*by Anthony Bowes*

The first four chapters of "Memoirs From the House of the Dead" introduce the reader to life in a Siberian Prison. The Narrator, or in this case, the author of the memoirs, is Alexander Petrovich, convicted for the murder of his wife. His memoirs were found by an acquaintance after Alexander had passed away. Early in the introduction, a mysterious mood is set around the Siberian prisons. On the first page, Dostoevsky writes, "Those among the prisoners who are capable of solving the riddle of life almost all remain in Siberia and gladly take root there."

Throughout the book, there is a sense that within the prison walls lessons can be learned which are true of life anywhere. From here, Alexander's memoirs tell the story of an aristocrat forced to live the life of a common criminal. He is astounded at the lack of remorse he finds in murderers, rapists and child killers. The narrator is always set apart from the rest of the prisoners. He is of a different social class, but he seems to be the only one who is interested in understanding how prison life both unites and separates all classes of men. The daily grind of the Siberian prison involves roll calls several times a day, and uniforms which make the prisoners stick out amongst the other "non-criminal" members of the Siberian community. While they are technically illegal, vodka, prostitutes, weapons, gambling and money are available to any inmate who has the wits to attain them.

The narrator makes a point of discussing at length the process by which vodka is smuggled into the prison. He feels the competition between the smuggler and the officers says something about man, something about his need to challenge himself and prove his worth. Days are filled with hard labor, of which the narrator has a distinct opinion. This labor, he concludes is so devastating to the prisoners because it in no way positively affects them. They are neither compensated nor do they take much pride in their assigned tasks. Fights are a common occurrence, as are beatings dolled out by supervisors. In light of all the problems of adjusting to prison life though, the narrator concludes "Man is a creature who can get used to anything, and I believe that is the very best way of defining him." Alexander is inquisitive, and as such he has many interesting run-ins with the other convicts. He is constantly trying to find out why each man has been sent to Siberia, and more importantly whether or not they feel remorse for their crimes.

As in any community there are bullies, pushovers, moneylenders and every other class of character inside the prison. He meets religious "Old Believers" who were left over from the Orthodox conversion. He befriends one man in particular, Akim Akimovich, another aristocrat who leads him around the prison and generally takes care of him. This portion of the book ends with the Narrator teaching a younger convict, Aley, to read. In true Dostoevsky style the book used to instruct young Aley is the New Testament. The young convicts favorite parts—"Forgive, Love, do not offend, love your enemies."

### Selected Quotes

### Part II

### Books 5 - 8

*by Katy Chamberlain*

### 5. The First Month (I)

The narrator longs to join the common man and yet is still surprised by his presence among them. He is excited to finally be able to join in work and at the same time he is afraid of becoming common. In this chapter we are introduced to many of the narrators prison mates, among them Sushilov. Sushilov takes it upon himself to be the narrators man servant. He is a meek character who enjoys even seeks out subordinate positions. The other prisoners tend to mock Sushilov for his simple-mindedness. The amicable relationship between the narrator and Akim Akimovich is also described, one of the few friendships that the narrator is able to develop at the beginning of his sentence. The narrator takes the opportunity to look through the minds eye of his prison mates and explore the mind of a prisoner. Most distinctively the narrator focuses on the prisoners need to assert his own personality and free will in a place where he has no freedom. The freedom that most people take for granted consumes the thoughts of the prisoner.

## 6. The First Month (II)

The first day of work that the narrator attends is indicative of the dynamics of inmates. They prisoners go on grumbling to each other about the weather, about their task, about life. When they are given an unmanageable task of breaking up a boat they perform the work sluggishly and inefficiently, however, when the overseer modifies the orders to a few specific feasible tasks, the groups works quickly and efficiently so that they can be done quickly and relax in any excess time they may gain. During all this work, the narrator, seems to be unhelpful, the other inmates yelling at him to get out of their way so that they may work. This was a sign of the other inmates attitudes towards noblemen in general and the narrator specifically. We also get a look into the narrators mind and his intense desire to be like everyone else, although he fears being a common man. At the end of a hard day of work, throughout which the narrator was out of place and useless, he returns to the prison yard and his one friend greets him, Sharik, the prison dog. Sharik is the one friend that the narrator makes who does not understand that he is a noble man, the dog only cares that the narrator is one of the only people who has ever been kind towards him.

## 7. New Acquaintances. Petrov

Although many of the prisoners shun the narrator and reject him because he is a gentleman, there are also the prisoners, like Sushilov who seek him out. One of these characters is Petrov: "the most desperate man in the whole prison". Petrov and the narrator have a sort of intellectual relationship. Petrov respects the narrator solely for his ability to have intellectual conversations. Any other sort of interaction and Petrov mocks the narrator. Significantly, the narrator lends Petrov his Bible to carry around. Petrov eventually sells the Bible when he is desperate for a drink and informs the narrator, without remorse, of his actions. This most desperate, unpredictable man, is an ally to our narrator throughout the book and helps the narrator by giving the other inmates reason to trust him.

### Character Analysis

## 8. Desperate People. Luke

Prison can inspire many new emotions among people, most distinctively is desperation. There are many types of desperation in the prison, but the prisoners who have reached this level are all considered base, regardless of the degree to which they are desperate. These characters will do anything out of desperation, desperation to escape their boredom, the escape their thoughts, to assert their free will... One such character is Luke Kuzmich. Luke "sincerely wished to pass as an awe-inspiring figure", but never inspired fear in anybody in the prison. Lukes most desperate act to inspire fear is seen in his telling of the story of his attack on the Major. A true story, Luke tells of his stabbing the major one evening when the Major came in to the cells to break up an argument. However, this and his other vile acts does not instill fear, but rather disdain.

## Books 9 - 11

by Aaron Murray-Nellis

### Chapter 9

opens with a closer look at Isaiah Fomich, a Jewish inmate, who finds his "proud" place at the end of everyone's jokes. His personality and demeanor fits all of the Jewish stereotypes and presents a flavor of the anti-Semitism of which Dostoevsky is often accused. Isaiah's fanatical religious lifestyle stirs up some commotion in the prison and people are often entertained by his beliefs and rituals. The entire prison went to the public baths during this chapter. The public baths were described as "Hell." The whole prison washed in groups of about a hundred in a room about twelve paces squared. In the baths, Petrovich had many people helping him even among all the chaos. One of the people who "cared" for Petrovich was Baklushin. Baklushin was from the Special Class and was referred to as being the most cheerful and good-hearted of all the prisoners, one who never lost his good humor. He tells his story of how he was condemned to prison for killing a "German." He had fallen in love with a German woman. His relationship with her was cut short by a marriage proposal she received from an older rich distant German relative of hers. She felt driven to accept and she was prohibited from having any contact with Baklushin. Baklushin, furious and heartbroken, barged into the room where Luisa (the one he loved), her aunt, and her fiancé (the German) were sitting and after an argument, shot the German. At the court trial, he swore and was convicted extra time in prison and put into Special Class.

### Chapter 10

#### Helpful Links

brings us to one of the two religious feasts in the novel: Christmas. On Christmas Eve, nobody does any work, and everyone seems to be expecting some great change to happen the next day. The prisoners are not allowed to be sent to work, as recognized by the law. There are only three days in the year like this- one day for Christmas and two days for Pascha (Easter). In the Christmas season, people show a kinder side. People tend to be friendly and greet each other in passing- which for some people rarely happened any other time of the year. An overwhelming feeling of "eat, drink, and be merry" fills the prison and everyone spends a great deal of their money on food to celebrate the season. A priest comes to serve liturgy with a cross, holy water and an icon. Even the prison's food rations prove generous this time of year. One pound of beef is issued to each prisoner. Drunkenness takes over the prisoners and songs break out. People are trying to hide their sadness. Certain characters begin to emerge who give the story some comic relief. Bulkin and Varlamov display a love-hate relationship. All this excitement is described to give the final sentence full meaning by stating that the "long-awaited holiday is over. Tomorrow is another weekday, we must work again"

### Chapter 11

The theater becomes the focus in the lives of the prisoners. Theater and other social events were strictly prohibited, however it is pretty much understood that the officials simply "look the other way" for this once-per-year event. The theatrical performances "cost the authorities nothing and involved them in no kind of sacrifice." The play is a huge ordeal with actors, costumes, scripts and everything that a play would need for performance, even

a curtain. The play was called Kedril the Glutton. In the preparation of the play, all the secrets of the play were kept contained among those in the production in order to surprise everyone with something completely unexpected. The crowd awaiting to get into the seating for the show was so crowded and chaotic that it was compared to the crowds at the baths. The narrator was given the best seats due to his rank and the larger amount of money that he was expected to give. He was also expected to be a better connoisseur of the theater. Everyone was packed into such a small place, but everyone seemed content due to the tension, the mystery and the anticipation of the theater. There was an orchestra of eight musicians that accompanied the play. The audience lay captivated for the moments before the show, and throughout the entire duration of the show in such a way that everyone was removed from their immediate reality. It was described as if this performance was like one brief hour to relax and enjoy themselves amid their lives of troubled dreams. The play was chopped up so that the plot was all mixed up and made no sense, but people didn't mind because it was the acting and the mystery that went along with the performance that was so special. It was done so professionally (or at least viewed in their minds as being so) that they talked about how Mother Russia is putting talent and energy to waste by having these "star actors" in prison. As everyone went to sleep that night, they all talked about the theater. The play revived the hope inside everyone's hearts and gave them new meaning to fill their everyday lives. Everyone was unified under the experience of the play.